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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000154

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TAGS: PTER PREL KISL RP

SUBJECT: CATHOLIC PRIEST SLAIN IN APPARENT KIDNAPPING ON TAWI-TAWI

Classified By: DCM Paul W. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The murder of a Catholic priest and abduction of a school principal and fisherman in Tawi-Tawi, a remote island along a terrorist transit line in the southern Philippines, has sent shock waves through this usually peaceful island. Security officials believe a group of 10 armed kidnappers wearing masks were responsible for the crime, and have little clear information regarding the identities and motives of the perpetrators. While some officials and civilians are alleging that the Abu Sayyaf terrorist organization was responsible, there is no firm evidence to substantiate the claims. In addition, there are conflicting reports about when and where the priest died during the abduction. What is clear is that the killing and kidnapping have drawn strong condemnation from all sectors of society, irrespective of religion. As interfaith mourning continues over this latest incident of violence and bloodshed, Philippine security officials are widening their dragnet to bring the perpetrators to justice and the hostages safely home. End Summary.

Priest Slain, School Principal and Fisherman Abducted

¶2. (SBU) Catholic priest Father Jesus Reynaldo A. Roda, a member of the Oblates of the Mary Immaculate Catholic Congregation (OMI), was shot to death January 15 during an apparent kidnapping at the Notre Dame School in Tawi-Tawi, a remote island in the southern Philippines. According to Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Police Chief Superintendent Joel Goltiao, the group of about 10 suspected kidnappers was armed and wore masks and hoods to conceal their identities. Philippine security forces are now searching for the suspects, who fled the area after taking Notre Dame School principal Omar Taup and fisherman Hussin Sahirul hostage.

Conflicting Reports

¶3. (SBU) There are conflicting accounts from police officials and civilians regarding Father Roda's murder. ARMM Police Chief Goltiao said Father Roda was shot to death during a gunbattle between law enforcement authorities and his abductors while being forcibly taken to a speedboat, one kilometer away from the Notre Dame campus. In Father Ramon Bernabe's version of the crime, Father Roda was killed while struggling with his abductors in the chapel where he was praying. The abductors then stole some valuables from Roda's office before taking Omar Taup hostage and fleeing the campus, said Bernabe. According to press reports, one witness claimed to have seen the armed men beat Roda before

killing him.

Abu Sayyaf Group Members Possible Suspects

¶ 14. (C) Former Tawi-Tawi Councilman Ramon Salapuddin said that Father Roda and Omar Taup were vocal critics of graft, corruption, and terrorism. Salapuddin suspected that "sympathizers" of the Abu Sayyaf Group, a terrorist organization from Jolo, may have been responsible for the murder and kidnapping.

¶ 15. (SBU) A relative of hostage Omar Taup -- Tawi-Tawi Police Superintendent Wyneright Taup -- claimed Father Roda received kidnapping threats from the Abu Sayyaf Group prior to the January 15 incident. Armed Forces of the Philippines Lt. Gen. Nelson Allaga told the press that a former policeman was believed to be among Roda's killers. The Philippine National Police and National Bureau of Investigation are coordinating their investigative efforts to identify the perpetrators.

Muslim and Christian Leaders Condemn the Killing

¶ 16. (SBU) Notre Dame School director and head of mission of OMI in Tawi-Tawi, Father Roda had been a long-time advocate of peace and development in Mindanao. Muslim and Christian leaders throughout the Philippines were quick to denounce his murder. House Deputy Speaker Simeon Datumanong and Peace Process Undersecretary Nabil Tan called the killing "un-Islamic and senseless." Autonomous Region in Muslim

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Mindanao Regional Governor Zaldy Ampatuan described the murder as "a satanic act and an affront to both Islam and Christianity." According to the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy, the slaying was "a barbaric attack against those who dedicate their lives for peace." Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines president Archbishop Angel Lagdameo said that "we condemn the violence and pray for a just solution."

MILF and MNLF Denounce Killing of Father Roda

¶ 17. (SBU) Senior members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) are also denouncing this latest incident of violence and bloodshed which came on the heels of peace rallies in cities across Mindanao. MILF Da'wah (Call to Islam) Committee Chairman Sheikh Mohammad Muntassir said that "we condemn this killing in the highest possible terms and the killers deserve Hell for their barbaric act." According to MNLF Secretary-General Muslimin Sema, the death of Father Roda was a "a great loss to peace advocates and fighters against oppression and exploitation." MNLF Secretary-General Abu Abuamri Taddik has directed MNLF members on Tawi-Tawi to monitor the incident.

Outpouring of Interfaith Grief

¶ 18. (SBU) Hundreds of Muslims and Christians filled the Holy Rosary Church in the Tawi-Tawi capital city of Bongao January 17 to pay their last respects to Father Roda. His remains will be brought to Cotabato City for burial at the OMI cemetery in Shariff Kabunsuan Province on January 23.

Other Priests Allegedly Targeted

¶9. (SBU) According to Philippine Army Major-General Nejemias Pajarito, the Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions were warned that four members of its religious order in Mindanao were targeted for abduction. Despite these warnings, the Italian religious order has decided to stay.

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